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ABSTRACT

This study documented implementation of the First Steps program, which provides additional support for development of literacy and numeracy among "at-risk" students in Western Australia schools, in twelve schools in different parts of the state, varying in population composition, and with different forms of support in adoption of First Steps methods. Data were gathered in surveys of principals, teachers, and parents and examination of school documents. The case studies are summarized. Findings include: all schools were making good progress in implementing the program; most had completed all or most of the professional development component; for most teachers, increases in workload and time demands had been heavy; those implementing one module at a time and following prescribed recording procedures had less difficulty; support from trained staff was perceived as vital to program success; more emphasis had been placed on the learning process; a sense of common purpose had evolved among staff; parents interviewed were highly supportive, but many were also poorly informed about the program; and parent participation was best in the lower grades. Program strengths and needs were also identified. (MSE)

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ED 419 425

CASE STUDIES OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FIRST STEPS PROJECT IN TWELVE SCHOOLS

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Dr Philip Deschamp
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Editor's Note

This document is one of a series of reports that document the formative research that supported the creation and development of *First Steps*™. As a result of this research, the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA), in collaboration with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) revised *First Steps* in response to each of the issues and questions raised by this research. *First Steps* training courses, Developmental Continua, and Resource Books are published with due amendments and alterations.

Other research documents that support the development of *First Steps* include:

Dr. Phil Deschamp:

- A Survey of the Implementation of the Literacy Component of the *First Steps* Project in WA
- The Implementation of The Literacy Component of The *First Steps* Project in ELAN Schools
- A Survey of the Effectiveness of the Focus Teacher 'B' Training for the *First Steps* Project
- Student Achievement: A Study of the Effects of *First Steps* Teaching on Student Achievement
- Case Studies of The Implementation of the *First Steps* Project in Twelve Schools
- The Development and Implementation of the *First Steps* Project in Western Australia

ACER:

- Empirical Validation of the *First Steps* Reading Continuum
- Empirical Validation of the *First Steps* Spelling and Writing Continua
- Empirical Re-Validation of the *First Steps* Spelling Continuum
- Assessment and Record of the Changes made to the Spelling Continuum
- The Impact of *First Steps* on Schools and Teachers
- The Impact of *First Steps* on the Reading and Writing Ability of Year 5 Students
- Background: *First Steps* and the ACER Evaluation & Report on the Validity of the *First Steps* Writing and Spelling Continua*

EDWA:

- Supporting Linguistic and Cultural Diversity Through *First Steps*: The Highgate Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this study was to document the implementation of First Steps in twelve schools situated in widely differing parts of the State and having experienced differing modes of support in the adoption of First Steps methods.

The opinions of principals, teachers, and parents were gathered and school documents were examined so as to portray in this report how First Steps was operating in the schools and what the people involved considered had happened as a result.

The case study schools were of varied size, location and type, several were PSP, ESL or ELAN schools, they began with First Steps at different times, and the people interviewed had at times widely different opinions, yet across the schools there were some frequently occuring views. These are offered as a surface summary of the rich information gathered during this project.

1. All of the case study schools were making substantial progress with implementing First Steps.

2. Their previous language programmes were said to have ranged from individual teacher planning of a traditional subject based approach with basal readers, spelling lists and standardised testing, to whole language, thematic, spelling journals using many of the First Steps strategies.

3. Most of the case study schools had completed all or most of the First Steps professional development. The vast majority of teachers' comments about the professional development were extremely positive:

   Wonderful documentation! A treasure of resource ideas.

   however many considered they had tried to cover **too much too quickly** and some wanted to emphasise that **a lot of First Steps was not new to me, but it was a useful reminder of strategies I had not used for a while.**.

4. For many teachers, especially those in schools which had tried to start on all of the modules, or where traditional testing and recording had been continued, the increase in workload and demands on their time had been heavy.

5. Teachers in schools that had attempted to implement one module at a time, and those which had moved entirely to First Steps recording procedures reported less time problems.

6. The support provided by Focus Teachers, Collaborative Teachers and District Office staff was seen as having been absolutely vital to successful implementation and teacher survival.

7. What teachers mean when they say they are using First Steps ranges from placing children at risk on a continuum, to using First Steps as the philosophical basis of their teaching by placing children on the continua, selecting teaching strategies to match each child's next needs, monitoring their progress closely, involving parents as partners, and recording students' progress in the First Steps computer program.

8. As a result of using First Steps teachers reported:
   - *We have become even busier.*
   - *There is more emphasis on the process of how children learn than the product they produce. There is more emphasis on meaning in their learning.*

9. ESL and ELAN children were held by many of those interviewed to benefit especially from the modelling and clear frameworks encouraged by First Steps. It was noted however that a few teachers (not in ELAN schools) held the opposite view and made statements such as *Of course it does not work with Aboriginal children.*

10. The effects on staff of working together on First Steps was reported to have resulted in gains in feeling a sense of common purpose and of being part of a team working on a common task with common strategies and vocabulary. A whole school focus on language had been developed sometimes for the first time.

11. The effects of following First Steps suggestions upon children were said to include:
   - *children's self-esteem was much higher, they were happier and their attitude to learning was more positive. They experienced more success so felt better about school and learning.*
   - *There was increased acceptance that its OK to make mistakes.*
   - *Children more willing to experiment with language.*
   - *More children are active in their learning and willing to use language more - especially in the lower grades.*

12. When asked for evidence of the changes they were claiming teachers said:
   - *You only have to look at them working and see their work to see the difference.*
   - *Just look at the variety in their Writing.*
   - *I suppose you could look at work samples over several years.*
   - *Most of us have seen children produce things we did not think they could.*
   - *I've been teaching Years 4/5 for six years so I'd know.*

The children's progress along the continua was seen by most of the teachers interviewed as showing that children were making sound progress.

13. As a summary of the knowledge that parents in the case study schools had of First Steps it would be fair to say that all of those spoken with were either very supportive or were prepared to back the school's judgement about such matters. However in some schools it was clear that notwithstanding many attempts to communicate the essence of First Steps to parents, less than half of the parents could be regarded as knowing anything significant about it.

14. Most of the case study schools had invited parents to assist with the implementation of First Steps strategies both at home and in the classroom. As is often the case, arrangements for parents assisting in the classroom worked most effectively in the lower year levels where more parents were at home because of having other children, or where parent interest in their child's schooling was at a peak.

15. Typical comments from parents included:
- *Most parents who know about First Steps like it.*
- *Most parents don't understand First Steps.*
- *Most parent trust the teachers here and think that if they are supporting it it must be good.*
- *My child seems happy.*

16. The best aspects of being a First Steps school were claimed to be:
- *the professional development,*
- *the improved student attitudes and results,*
- *the staff team building,*
- *their increased interest in and enjoyment of teaching,*
- *having had Focus Teachers to assist with implementation,*
- *their increased clarity about their teaching, and*
- *the increased variety of strategies at their disposal.*

17. The common dificulties encountered during the implementation stages were:
- *the extra time required (particularly in the initial stages)*
- *frustrations arising from coming to understand and agree as a staff about the meaning of aspects of the continua and the Indicators.*
- *Changes to the continua.*
- *training temporary teachers who were then lost to the school,*
- *incoming teachers who had not been trained,*
- *starting too much too quickly (We started three continua at once and had to learn three recording systems!),*
- *placements varying within and across schools.*
- *difficulties with the Oral Language continuum and ELAN students*
- *unresolved issues regarding reporting using the continua*

18. All of the case study schools considered that First Steps could only move forwards in the school.

- *Its part of our School Development Plan, so its here to stay.*
- *It won't die here.*

Some still had other modules to adopt and were planning for the necessary professional development.

- *We need now to do Oral Language.*
- *I wish we knew what was happening in Maths.*

19. The further steps needed for extending the implementation of First Steps in the case study schools were:

- *Finish the Modules*
- *Gain time to Reflect*
- *Encouraging the tardy*
- *Clarify the valid uses of student data*
- *Clarify reporting to parents using continua data*
- *Refine the Indicators*
- *work out the relationship between First Steps and Student Outcomes*
- *Complete the Policy Development for Literacy*

20. It was surprising how many interviews finished with an emotional statement such as:

Great program! I love it.

If one were to select the teacher comments which best captured the prevailing (but by no means unanimous) attitude towards the experience of working with First Steps, they would be:

- *It has reminded us that teaching does not equal learning, and that we must move at a pace the child can handle.*
- *If you follow First Steps procedures there is success and children feel it and confidence grows. Nothing succeeds like success.*
- *It was the first quality professional development I've ever had.*

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Preface

The First Steps project

The First Steps project emerged in 1988 in response to a growing perception in schools and the Central Office of the Education Department that many children who were experiencing difficulties in learning Literacy were not having their needs adequately met. Increasing awareness of the difficulties experienced by these children, coupled with their increasing numbers in their local schools due to increasing acceptance of the policy of *mainstreaming* children with learning difficulties had caused a ground swell demand for professional development for teachers on better ways of assisting these children.

Earlier responses to this perceived area of need had included major professional development initiatives on the wholistic nature of learning and language such as the Early Literacy Inservice Course (ELIC) which had achieved improvements but it was widely believed that its implementation had been too dependent upon individual teacher initiatives which often had not received sufficient overt support and encouragement at the whole school level. Experience from involvement with ELIC suggested that the problem should be addressed more comprehensively as a whole school issue back at the educational bedrock of teaching principles and teaching methods.

In direct response to requests from schools Education Department officers devised a proposal for a radical refocus on the teaching of language. They put this proposal to Government for support and the extra funding needed to enable the implementation process to be designed in a way that ensured that the proposed approach was embedded in a whole school approach to the teaching of language. To capture the notion that this was a *back to basics* proposal it was titled *First Steps*. The proposal had as its goal:

> *To ensure that all K-5 children, especially those at risk, make measurable progress in the areas of mathematics and early literacy learning, and are able to sustain that progress in their later primary years.*

The project that evolved spread rapidly across schools in Western Australia. In 1994 three research projects were commissioned to document the origins of the project and the extent to which schools had adopted its materials and recommended procedures.

- The first project was to develop a history of First Steps from 1988 to 1994.
- The second was to survey 150 schools around the State to ask principals, teachers and parents about the extent to which First Steps was operating in the school, and what they considered had happened as a result.
- The third project consisted of case studies of twelve schools situated in widely differing parts of the State, and having experienced differing modes of support in the adoption of First Steps methods.

This is the report of the third of these projects - the case studies of 12 schools.

1.0 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The First Steps project had been the focus of a number of separate but related evaluation projects since it began in Western Australia in 1988. The results of some of these evaluations have been described in the history report mentioned in the Preface.

The companion project involving a survey of 150 schools was intended to gather a State-wide perspective of the implementation of First Steps in Government schools in Western Australia, however surveys gather quite different levels of information to that which is possible from case studies.

The aim of this study was to document in more detail the implementation of First Steps in twelve schools situated in widely differing parts of the State and having experienced differing modes of support in the adoption of First Steps methods, but which were regarded as having made **good progress** with the implementation process.

2.0 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project addressed the following questions:

1. When did this school begin with First Steps?
2. Prior to starting First Steps what was the structure of the Literacy programme?
3. What Professional Development in First Steps has the school participated in?
4. What do staff think about First Steps?
5. To what extent have First Steps strategies been implemented?
6. What has changed as a result of First Steps?
7. What outcomes have resulted from First Steps?
8. What data do you have to show how outcomes are changing?
9. What have parents been told about First Steps?
10. What roles do parents play with regard to First Steps?
11. What do parents think about First Steps?
12. What have been the best aspects of being a First Steps school?
13. What is the future of First Steps in the school?
14. What still needs to be done in the school?

3.0 METHODOLOGY ADOPTED

With the guidance of the Steering Committee, the project passed through the following steps:

- The purposes of the study were discussed and the research questions clarified. Then separate but similar interview schedules were drafted for principals, teachers, Focus Teachers (these are selected teachers who have been trained to assist other teachers to implement the First Steps approach with their children) and parents to address research questions.

- The list of schools to be contacted were decided in discussion with the Steering Committee. The sample was chosen so as to obtain:
  - schools spread across the State,
  - schools of various sizes, and
  - schools which experienced different modes of introduction to the First Steps project.

- The draft interview questions were refined with the assistance of the Steering Committee until they believed that they asked the desired questions in a manner which would be understood by the people being interviewed.

- Schools were contacted by telephone to describe the project and invite their participation. It was noteworthy that, notwithstanding the general feelings of intense business in all of the schools, all of those selected for involvement with the project accepted the invitation.

- Principals were asked to arrange a programme of interview times so that the researchers could talk with a small group of parents, the administrative team, the Focus Teachers, and all of the staff in small schools or in larger schools, teachers from all levels of the school.

- The researchers also asked to see any school documents which related to the implementation of First Steps. The documents shown included School Development Plans, teachers' programs, daily lesson plans, and student records.

- The interview questions and a brief outline of the purpose of the project were dispatched in advance of visits so that the people to be interviewed could assemble their ideas and even discuss issues with others if they chose. (Sample instruments and letters are contained in the appendix.)

- The resulting data were analysed and then described in this report which is written with the audience of Decision-makers in mind. The draft was given first to the case study schools and then to the Steering Committee for comment before finalisation. Copyright of the report is owned by the Education Department.

- Rather than write twelve separate sub-reports, the decision was taken to report the findings from the twelve case studies in a way which identified the common areas and then described different situations in the various schools.

- The Steering Committee also decided not to identify the twelve schools. While some may be guessable by some readers, it was thought to be divergent if readers were encouraged to wonder which comments related to which schools. The Steering Committee wishes to express its appreciation of the helpfulness of the twelve schools in co-operating with this project.

4.0 THE CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

The initial requirement for being selected as a case study school was that it was believed to be demonstrating **best practice** with First Steps methods. The project was to be a study of schools which were perceived as having implemented First Steps successfully. To be judged *successful* the school needed to have participated extensively in the First Steps professional development and then have made substantial progress with implementing First Steps procedures. This aspect of the selection process was decided on the basis of the information held by the Steering Committee members and those they consulted regarding the progress with implementation being made by First Steps schools.

As stated above, the twelve case study schools were selected so as to have a spread across the State from the far north to near Albany. They included a small remote area school, special language schools, large country schools, and a range of metropolitan schools.

The schools were also chosen to obtain a range of different modes of introduction to the First Steps project. The schools included:

Core Schools (ie schools with students with most need, which were given full funding and support),
Cell Schools (ie schools with students with high levels of need, which were given partial funding and support),
Associate Schools (ie schools which had paid for their own professional development and Focus Teachers).
PSP (Priority Schools Program) schools
ELAN (English language) schools
ESL (English as a Second language) schools
PCAP (Priority Country Area) schools

To capture changes that had occurred with regard to the professional development aspects of the programme, the schools were also selected on the basis of the year in which they joined the First Steps programme.

The schools are identified in this report as:

School A — a large metropolitan primary school in a low SES area, with involvement with the PSP, ESL and ELAN programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.

School B — an outer metropolitan primary school which had used school resources to supplement partial funding to participate in the First Steps program.

School C — a large metropolitan primary school which had partial funded to participate in the program.

School D	a metropolitan junior primary school with involvement with the PSP and ESL programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.
School E	a large metropolitan primary school which had used school resources to participate in the program.
School F	a large metropolitan primary school which had used school resources to participate in the program.
School G	a metropolitan primary school with involvement with the PSP, ESL and ELAN programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.
School H	a country primary school with involvement with the PSP, ESL and ELAN programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.
School I	a distant district high school with involvement with the PSP, ESL and ELAN programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.
School J	a large country primary school with involvement with the PSP, ESL and ELAN programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.
School K	a small remote community school with involvement with the PSP, ESL and ELAN programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.
School L	a country primary school with involvement with the PSP, ESL and ELAN programs, and which had been fully funded to participate in the First Steps program.

5.0 RESULTS

This section describes the findings across the twelve schools under headings which approximate to the interview questions.

5.1 When the schools began with First Steps

Table 1 sets out a summary of the school types and locations and shows the year in which they commenced their involvement with First Steps. It shows that the schools selected for the case studies include a range of starting periods. Some of the schools commenced at the beginning of the project, and others had joined in more recently. All had had sufficient time with the project to make it possible for significant progress to be made with implementing the ideas and recommended procedures.

Typical scenarios were:

> *In 1991 we had a taster year of language. In 1992 we were a cell school with a Focus Teacher. In 1993 we had a Focus Teacher in a support role, and in 1994 we have had lots of in-service.*
>
> *We had eight collaborative teachers. It was like eight extra teachers for a term. They put the children on the continua and showed us good First Steps practice. They gave us time to learn.*
>
> *We were an Associate school for a while and just had a smattering of help. That was not sufficient so we put in a desperate submission to be a Cell school. This won us collaborative teachers for two terms. Listening is OK but watching the collaborative teachers in action was powerful.*
>
> *We started slowly with Spelling, then moved to Writing as there is a natural link. Then to Reading where it has a thorough grip on Years K to 3. Now we are awareness raising in Maths while Spelling is on maintenance. We are going slow and steady.*

School G was included in the case study schools because of its special situation with regard to having so many children from up to 30 different non-English speaking backgrounds (such as Tigrina and Amheric from Ethiopia) that it had been set up with an Intensive Language Center. Children arrive with little or no oral or written language.

The school also had an ESL (English as a Second Language) Center which takes students after they graduate from the Special Language Center. The ESL Center uses a wide range of First Steps ideas.

Schools I, K and J were included because of their large Aboriginal population which required a special ELAN (English Language) focus.

Table 1 Year of commencement with the First Steps project

School	Location	Funding	Commencement
A	metropolitan	fully funded	1991
B	outer metropolitan	partially funded	1991
C	metropolitan	school resources	1992 - Associate school, 1993 - Core school
D	junior primary	fully funded	1990 Core school, PSP, ESL
E	metropolitan	school resources	1991
F	metropolitan	school resources	1992
G	metropolitan Special Language Center	fully funded	1991
H	country primary	fully funded	1990 (planning) 1991 (real beginning)
I	distant district high ELAN	fully funded	1990 (planning) 1991 (real beginning)
J	large country primary	fully funded	1989/90
K	remote community school ELAN	fully funded	1992 with arrival of the present staff
L	country primary	fully funded	1992

5.2 Structure of the Literacy programme prior to starting First Steps

Most of the twelve schools reported that prior to commencing with First Steps the Literacy programme in each classroom had been highly dependent upon the beliefs and training of the teacher. There were few examples of schools having an effective **whole school Literacy programme**.

Typical description were:

- *We identified focus areas such as Formal English, then each teacher wrote up their (sic) own plan. There was no continuity across subjects or year levels.*
- *Unit Progress had been thrown out. There had been no replacement reading notes. There was nothing for spelling or oral language, no goals or strategies. Teachers wrote their own programmes. All were different.*
- *Each teacher was doing his or her own thing.*
- *It was very segmented. Grammar, Reading, Spelling, Writing, and Oral Language were taught as separate areas. Some of us were using My Word books. Phonics was taught in isolation.*
- *30 minutes spelling, 30 minutes phonics, 30 minutes formal English.*
- *Upper School taught Language as separate areas, but Junior School had been on a Whole Language approach for years.*
- *Pre-Primary teachers considered the rest of the school was catching up with developmental learning and learning to do what they had been doing for years.*
- *Hotch potch! All doing their best with what they had. No common idea about how to fix a problem.*
- *We had very strong teachers so most kids did well, but there were a core of identified failures in Year 1.*

Even within the same case study school, teachers' descriptions of their Literacy programmes ranged from the very traditional, such as:

- *Largely reading and formal language.*
- *We did a lot of **punctuating paragraphs**.*
- *I remember lots of Dolch words and phonic work*

to those who felt they had been using an approach with similar components to First Steps for years, who said:

- *A lot of First Steps was not new to me as I trained in New Zealand*
- *We have had children on their own spelling lists for about eight years,*
- *I was theme based, not teaching separate topics,*
- *We did a lot of Process Writing.*
- *I haven't changed much. Always have been Whole Language. Only assessment really has changed. Previously the Principal wanted it in the separate areas.*

Table 2 Structure of the Literacy programme prior to starting First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Literacy programme
A	metro	fully	Individual teacher planning, Whole Language in Junior School, Traditional language areas in Upper School
B	outer metro	partial	School focus on language, Individual teacher planning, No co-ordination across classes. Traditional language to developmental focuses
C	metro	school resources	Individual teacher planning, No co-ordination, Spelling Journals also My Word Book
D	junior primary	fully	Formal Language programme, Textbook focus, separate subjects remedial groups, process writing, support teacher withdrew children
E	metro	school resources	Individual teacher planning, Whole Language in Junior School, Traditional language areas in Upper School
F	metro	school resources	Everyone doing their own thing. No agreed language policies Mostly traditional language some integration
G	metro Special Language Center	fully	Special Language Center and ESL and Pre-Primary were whole language. Junior School whole language Senior School content based.
H	country primary	fully	My Word Books, regular testing, separate subject areas, limited thematic approaches.
I	district high ELAN	fully	Lower primary had a thematic approach with text base. Upper primary had no overall policy. Each teacher chose own path. Standardised testing.
J	large country primary	fully	Whole Language in Junior School. Upper school had traditional language, phonics, reading texts, spelling lists, standardised testing.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully	No written policies. Traditional language, phonics, reading texts, spelling lists, standardised testing
L	country primary	fully	Individual teacher planning, Whole Language in Junior School, themes, spelling journal. Writing from ELIC. Traditional language areas in Upper School

5.3 Professional Development in First Steps

Most of the case study schools had participated in all of the professional development programmes which had been available. They had usually completed the Reading, Writing, and Spelling. Some had completed the Oral Language and a few had started the Mathematics.

Several schools had commenced intending to involve only teachers of years K-5, but had managed to arrange for teachers of Years 6 and 7 also to be attend the professional development.

An interesting comment made by a teacher who had transferred in to one of the case study schools that year was:

> *It is very different here to my previous school. There we could all do all the training but it was left to each teacher to decide whether to go, and if you did, what you did regarding implementation. So not everybody went and not everybody did it.*
>
> *Here it was a whole school decision that everybody would attend and that we would all do it. So we all went and are all doing it. The other approach was a waste of time and money in comparison.*

In several schools, especially those which had been involved in other projects at the same time, there was a general feeling that they had tried to learn too much too quickly such that most people felt that the professional development had been excellent but overwhelming.

> *The professional development was excellent, but we did too much too quickly. Schools which did one area at a time went better. There was just so much paper! Some teachers were overwhelmed and just put it in the cupboard.*

School A with two Focus Teachers said that they had been able to offer *in-house* professional development from 1992 to 1994 and that this had consolidated the information from the centrally arranged professional development. As the ELAN role developed in some case study schools the staff realised it needed a full time teachers supporting other teachers and were able to achieve this. The connection between the professional development and in-school support was so strong that some teachers said:

> *Full blown professional development and collaborative teachers was great. If we'd just had the professional development it would not have been half as good.*

Common reactions to the professional development were:

- *I knew most of the strategies, but it served to refresh me and now I understand them better and use a wider variety.*
- *It broke some teachers out of a spelling list and maths exercise mind set.*
- *The strong and experienced teachers were pleased to see that First Steps advocated strategies they recognized as successful. It gave them confidence in it.*
- *We did it out of sinc. We should have done Oral Language first as everything hangs on it.*

Some common negative comments were:

- *Sessions on the continuum and Indicators were a waste of time.*
- *Some of the presenters were excellent. Some were condescending and boring. The practical sessions and school based sharing were good.*
- *At first I thought I can't handle this.*

Teachers in one school considered that they had had so much professional development and had such good Focus Teachers that they could handle their own professional development from now on. They were planning to modify some aspects of First Steps to suit their school - especially in the area of record keeping.

Table 3 Professional Development in First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Professional Development
A	metro	fully	Completed Reading, Writing, Spelling and Oral Language plus Linking Day, Doing Mathematics this year
B	outer metro	partial	Completed Reading, Writing, Spelling, Doing Mathematics this year, Focus Teachers doing Oral Language
C	metro	school resources	Completed Reading, Writing, Spelling and Oral Language plus Linking Day,
D	junior primary	fully	Completed Reading, Writing, Spelling and Oral Language plus Linking Day, Doing Mathematics this year
E	metro	school resources	Completed Reading, Writing, Spelling New teachers given a top up.
F	metro	school resources	We did it all! Now can do it ourselves thanks to excellent Focus Teachers.
G	metro Special Language Center	fully	Did it all, then kept up with school funding.
H	country primary	fully	All modules including Maths and Train the Trainer
I	district high	fully	Completed Reading, Writing, Spelling and Oral Language. New staff trained by Focus Teacher. Top up sessions for all staff as requested.
J	large country primary	fully	Completed Writing, Spelling and Oral Language
K	remote community school ELAN	fully	Both staff given full range of First Steps professional development plus ELAN training.
L	country primary	fully	All modules including Maths and Train the Trainer

5.4 Staff opinions about First Steps

Notwithstanding that only schools believed to be examples of best practice with the implementation of First Steps were selected as case study schools, the full range of possible opinions about First Steps were expressed by teachers. It was clear that if there was a developmental continuum showing teachers' adoption of First Steps practices, the teachers in the case study schools would be spread right across it.

Some began the interview with comments such as **I'm an old dog that finds it hard to learn new tricks**, while others were keen to share their excitement or were willing to **give it a go**. Even in schools which had decided as a staff to take on First Steps there were often one or two teachers who were passively resistant.

> *I just place the children at risk in reading, but I don't use it.*

> *I'm probably anti the continua. At my previous school we were continuumed to death! The continua from other teachers were not believable, too subjective.*

The most common positive comments included:

- *Terrific! It ties past ideas together meaningfully. The continuum becomes the foundation of your teaching.*
- *It removes the fail mentality.*
- *The Writing strategies are excellent.*
- *Children come to understand the writing frameworks and it really helps them think about writing.*
- *For the first time since college we saw other teachers teaching, and usually good ones at that.*
- *Children learn the procedures and start thinking in terms of First Steps strategies (such as **We can do a Brainstorm or Key Words for that**).*
- *The motivation to learn and try new strategies has increased.*
- *The heartache over changing practice has gone and people are at home with it.*
- *Wonderful documentation! A treasure of resource ideas.*
- *We are now giving children time to learn.*
- *Teaching has taken on a new focus.*
- *Children at risk are getting more attention.*
- *It has reminded us that teaching does not equal learning, and that we must move at a pace the child can handle.*
- *If you follow First Steps procedures there is success and children feel it and confidence grows. Nothing succeeds like success.*
- *It was the first quality professional development I've every had.*

The most common negative comments included:

- *Its not new.*
- *Lots of our teachers are not using the strategies. They need convincing they can do it. Managing the Spelling Journal troubled some teachers.*
- *There is not enough structure. Children need structure. If you just did First Steps children would not develop.*
- *It is a lot of time and work - especially putting children on the continuum. Heaven knows how we would have managed without the Focus Teacher!*
- *Our initial placements were heavily influenced by teacher expectations. Teachers wanted to be correct and feared making inappropriate placements.*
- *People did not realize how much extra work it would require, despite the warnings.*
- *I'm not keen on the continuum unless we can use it for reporting. There is no point if we do it and put it in the cupboard.*
- *We can't show parents how their children are progressing in ways they can understand.*
- *Different teachers still interpret the continua differently (but we are becoming more consistent). We had whole staff discussions about what the Indicators meant and defined our own set of key Indicators for our school.*
- *Our two Focus Teachers disagree about the continuum.*
- *Teachers liked the new activities rather than the more guided approach to what is being taught.*
- *We don't see children making enough progress along the continuum to feel we are getting somewhere.*
- *Its hard to apply with such as transient population.*
- *Upper School teachers feel under resourced (eg Big Books).*
- *It was designed to teach children at risk, not as an accountability mechanism.*
- *Developmental learning is great, but by Year 3 children are so spread we spend all our time preparing.*
- *Every year we start off with lower expectations. Its not improving.*
- *Some children learn when you tell them. You could wait for readiness for ever.*
- *I don't look at the continuum from last year. It colours your judgment about the child.*
- *Year 2 teachers may have one expectation of what the Indicators mean at that level, and Year 3 teachers might see it quite differently.*
- *I only look at the continuum to complete it.*
- *Teachers haven't time to read books that thick.*

- *Some aspects of Literacy are missing such as Poetry and Letters.*
- *The Support Teacher doesn't see our continuum and we don't see hers.*
- *Good teachers know where their children are without placing them on a continuum.*

The common comment about the amount of extra work involved was frequently followed by a comment to the effect that:

- *You would expect that when you are learning something new, or*
- *Initially we did not understand the Levels or Indicators properly (we thought the top level was Level 7!) but we worked it out over time,*
- *It takes time to come to terms with Developmental Learning.*
- *We are told at the professional development that the continuum is your evaluation, but Admin. still want test results.*
- *It would help if we could develop a continuum for our own school.*
- *There is no time to get together with other teachers of the same Year level to discuss placement or other problems.*
- *The able children extend themselves. The weak go out. I couldn't cope if the weak couldn't go out. It doesn't hurt them. They know they are weak no matter what you do.*
- *Teachers are too busy to get into the books. We are using the strategies we saw in the professional development, or those we can grab and copy.*
- *There is enough time if the school lets go the old testing approach.*

It seemed clear that the schools that had started slowly (say with one area at a time) and those with most support had an easier implementation experience. Teachers were more positive and spoke less about time and stress issues and more about the positive results achieved.

Where schools had taken the position that First Steps data were all the records needed teachers were not in the position of gathering test data as well as First Steps data. While many still wanted external validation of their progress, these teachers did not claim the same time pressures.

Some teachers expressed concern about the suitability of the Oral Language Indicators for Aboriginal students. One school developed its own *English Speaking Board* to assist Aboriginal students.

Table 4 Staff opinions about First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Opinions
A	metro	fully	Most receptive, some cautious, Focus Teachers were the key to acceptance
B	outer metro	partially	Lot of work, some parts are excellent, confusion over interpreting the continuum
C	metro	school resources	Terrific! If you follow First Steps procedures there is success and children feel it and confidence grows.
D	junior primary	fully	Lot of work, some parts are excellent, confusion over interpreting the continuum, does not suit every child or teacher
E	metro	school resources	Lot of work, some parts are excellent, confusion over interpreting the continuum, does not suit every child or teacher
F	metro	school resources	Quite practical Target teaching strategies which fit our students.
G	metro Special Language Center	fully	Some teachers were resistant, some still opt out. Some are excited and enthusiastic.
H	country primary	fully	A change for the better. It feels good. Writing has given us a structure. Children need more phonic skills.
I	district high ELAN	fully	Initially threatened, now very positive, enthusiastic converts! Fantastic! Only way to go! Takes a long time and its hard work. Based on very good practices in a sound framework.
J	large country primary	fully	Most teachers very positive. Some reluctant to adopt.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully	Very good strategies and record keeping. Transient Aboriginal population so First Steps records can follow them. Problems using the Mathematics material.
L	country primary	fully	All teachers have embraced First Steps.

5.5 Extent of implementation of First Steps strategies

Administration and Focus Teachers in several schools stated that although it was a joint staff decision that the school as a whole would adopt First Steps strategies, teachers were not pressured to go beyond their comfort zone.

In some schools, to lessen the workload, it had been agreed that children would be placed on the continuum in only one or two aspects of language (eg Writing and Spelling) or only *students at risk* need be put on the continuum. In some cases the children who were not seen as *at risk* were placed only with regard to the Key Indicators. In these circumstances most teachers had found the workload reasonable (if they could get assistance when needed).

In case study schools that had advocated all students being placed on all of the continua it was common for teachers to express concern at the workload.

When discussing coming to know about and use First Steps one teacher said:

> *I found Reading hard, Writing easier, and Spelling easy. I am using it in all these areas, but I don't know what other teachers do.*

It became apparent that teachers had different interpretations of what it meant to be *using First Steps*. Teachers were not clear as to whether it meant to place children on the continuum, to plan teaching from the continuum placements, to use First Steps teaching strategies, or to place, plan, teach and report on the basis of the continuum.

Perhaps due to the lack of clarity and the demands of time a few teachers were completing the continua and then storing them in the cupboard until the next time for placing students.

In many of the schools at least some of the teachers, and those mainly in the upper primary year levels, were marking at least some of the children on the continua, and were then using the continuum as a way of recording student progress, but did not use them as a basis for planning their teaching.

> *We have all children placed on all the continua (except Maths). We are still clarifying some of the Indicators. Now we are beginning to look at classroom practice. It was too threatening to start with classroom practice. It has taken all this time to get this far.*

> *We place all children twice a year in Spelling and Writing. Teachers use strategies in these areas because it is school policy. Some might just put the continua in the cupboard.*

A principal stated:

> *We are not a First Steps school! We are a school that uses some First Steps ideas. We see it as a tool, but we still teach some Single Sounds, tables, have a support group, etc. We don't want to be locked into one method.*

One teacher stated:

> *Direct Instruction is still alive and well in some classes, in others there is still a Quiet Classroom with children afraid to talk.*

It became clear that in some schools teachers decided for themselves how fast and to what extent they would proceed with implementing First Steps procedures. For example, teachers said:

> *I don't implement all First Steps. I take what I can. I can't start 50 strategies. Its too hard. I'm learning as fast as I can.*
> *We still teach single sounds,.*
> *Its a case of HAVE A GO for teachers.*

In other schools there was more shared discussion about what they were actually trying now and going to try next.

One school with mostly Aboriginal children considered that the Oral Language module was not suitable for their children as many could not get started on the continuum. However they considered that their teaching of other subject areas including social Studies, Health, and Science was now based upon First Steps principles.

Table 5 Extent of implementation of First Steps strategies

School	Location	Funding	Extent of implementation
A	metro	fully	Focussing on children at risk, but all children on Reading and Writing continua. Most teachers applying some aspects. Placing all children on one Maths outcome.
B	outer metro	partially	All do Reading, Writing, Spelling Just starting Mathematics
C	metro	school resources	Most teachers implemented Spelling and Writing, Reading is still being used experimentally, Children at risk placed on continuum, others only placed on the Key Indicators.
D	junior primary	fully	All children placed on all continua, Beginning connection to classroom practice Teachers have tried a lot of the strategies.
E	metro	school resources	Most teachers implemented Spelling and Writing, Reading is still being used experimentally, Children at risk placed on continuum, others only placed on the Key Indicators.
F	metro Special Language Center	school resources	Varying degrees across teachers. Everyone analysing teaching practice. Lots of sharing. Spelling, Oral Language, Writing in place, Reading and Maths started.
G	metro Special Language Center	fully	Students in the Special Language Center usually can't start the continuum. Oral Language doesn't fit our children. Use of continua and strategies negotiable with other teachers.
H	country primary	fully	Trying to do it all. Trying to use the strategies. Changing the report format. Writing policies. Parent involvement
I	district high ELAN	fully	Spelling, Reading, Writing, Oral Language all being used. Now trying to refine and improve their use. Teachers must have a sound understanding of one module before moving onto the next. Strategies going so well. Plotting all children on Key Indicators in Writing. At risk students plotted on all indicators.
J	large country primary	fully	Most teachers are using it to some extent - some enthusiastically, some reluctantly.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully	Spelling, Reading, Writing, Oral Language all being used. Children placed on continua in all areas except Oral Language which is not suitable for Aboriginal children.
L	country primary	fully	First Steps implemented K-7 in Writing and Reading. Strategies only used in Oral Language.

5.6 Changes as a result of First Steps

The people interviewed gave a varied list of responses in this area:

- *We have become even busier.*
- *There are more resources, more idea sharing, more thematic teaching, more teacher experimenting.*
- *There is more emphasis on the process of how children learn than the product they produce. There is more emphasis on meaning in their learning.*
- *It taught me strategies which make children think more deeply.*
- *All of us got headaches!*
- *In Spelling we have gone from set lists to each child's individual lists. In Reading we have moved from answering questions on a passage and a few repeated strategies to having a whole range of things to try. In Writing we have been using conference writing for some time, not we have set patterns to follow. Its too early to say for Maths.*
- *The best part of First Steps is the Writing forms.*
- *First Steps tells you what to teach. It de-mystifies Language and Language strategies.*
- *Instead of teaching the syllabus, we are teaching the children what they are ready to learn next. There is a reduced expectation that all children will cover X in Year X.*
- *Instead of seeing the children as hard to teach, we are finding out what they can do and starting from there.*
- *We are now giving children time to learn. Not a rush to get through everything.*
- *My expectations of children are way up.*
- *It has rekindled my enthusiasm for teaching.*
- *Children at risk are getting more attention.*
- *More peer tutoring.*
- *Much more Modelling.*
- *No copying from the board or Chalk and Talk.*
- *We have gone from a hotch potch to a common focus on language across the school. Teachers are more precise in how they talk about language and have a common vocabulary.*
- *Everybody is more positive and enthusiastic. Even if it is just the enthusiasm for something new, there is more staffroom talk about professional things such as which strategies worked.*
- *We are more of a team and commonly discuss our experiments with teaching strategies at morning tea.*
- *We know what the children are bringing with them from last year.*
- *When I think about what to teach next, I now start from what I know the children are ready to learn next. Then I think about what subject area will best assist them to learn it.*

The Writing module received lots of positive comments from teachers who valued their increased knowledge about forms and teaching strategies.

In several case study schools teachers cautioned about trying to start doing *everything at once*. They said:

- *There is no time problem if you set a gentle pace for implementing the First Steps ideas.*
- *We just plot the children at risk on the continuum. For the others its just the Key Indicators. We build up gradually. Try different things. Try things others say work. The Admin. here are very supporting (perhaps because the Deputies have classes). If a teachers is having a problem they provide time and assistance. You can get help to place children on the continuum.*

One school noted that the amount of work teachers had to do to learn the First Steps suggestions at a particular level had made teachers reluctant to change the year level they teach.

ESL and ELAN children were held by many of those interviewed to benefit especially from the modelling and clear frameworks encouraged by First Steps. It was noted however that a few teachers (not in ELAN schools) held the opposite view and made statements such as *Of course it does not work with Aboriginal children.*

Table 6 Changes as a result of First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Changes
A	metro	fully	Increased teaching of children from where they presently are.
B	outer metro	partially	Changes to teaching methods in Spelling, Reading, and to a lesser extent Writing
C	metro	school resources	Common focus on language across the school, know what children are bringing with them, Renewed enthusiasm for teaching.
D	junior primary	fully	Increased teaching of children from where they presently are and the teaching process. Common focus on language across the school, increased workload
E	metro	school resources	More resources, more idea sharing, more thematic teaching, more teacher experimenting.
F	metro	school resources	More of a team. Whole school focus on learning. Know more about developmental learning.
G	metro Special Language Center	fully	Strategies not new but it legitimises what we do. Teachers more focussed on what they do. Whole school working to one philosophy of language with similar methods.
H	country primary	fully	Given structure to Writing. Reading more enjoyable. Spelling student centred. More resources required and available. Extra teaching time needed. Language as a whole has changed.
I	district high ELAN	fully	Collaborative planning. Great resources. Continuity of policies, vocabulary and teaching strategies in language across the school. More group work. Increased sharing -even with other schools.
J	large country primary	fully	School Development Plan more cohesive. More of a whole language approach.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully	Much more Writing being done. More integration of subjects. Greater continuity of programming.
L	country primary	fully	Written language more structured now we have frameworks. Less use of standardised tests.

5.7 Outcomes that have resulted from First Steps

A consistent response regarding the outcomes of working with First Steps was that children's self-esteem was much higher, they were happier and their attitude to learning was more positive. They experienced more success so felt better about school and learning.

Teachers considered that the **Have a go** approach had created a lot more confidence to risk learning without fear of failure.

- *There was increased acceptance that its OK to make mistakes.*
- *Children more willing to experiment with language.*
- *More children are active in their learning and willing to use language more - especially in the lower grades.*
- *Teachers are more conscious of working with language, so experiment more and children become more conscious also.*

Parents and teachers remarked that as each group was working on different activities, weak children could be catered for in the class without it being obvious that they are on different work.

> *They do not see one child getting eight out of ten when they are getting only two. He sits there with the others. He doesn't know he is different.*

Removing the boundaries between traditional subject areas and trying fresh teaching strategies had resulted in previously uninterested students passing comments like **Is this Reading? It is good!**

One aspect of children's increased confidence was thought to derive from their increasing knowledge of strategies they can try. One teacher said:

- *They know they have a range of strategies which they can apply in situations like this - for example Read On. They feel confident of being able to find one that is appropriate and feel responsible for their own learning.*
- *I'm doing a lot more modelling, more Step-by -step, more group work, and more discussion. It may take three weeks to teach a form of writing that would have taken one lesson, but now they remember it.*
- *By teaching them to recognize the strategies, we are giving children the learning skills they will need in later education.*
- *Children are starting to actually think!*

A frequent comment from teachers was that because they were seeing their teaching plan from the perspective of the continuum, they were much clearer about what they were trying to teach, and had much clearer and higher expectations of the students.

- *I map one child a week and I can see the difference for that child in the week!*

- *I prefer to plot children towards the middle of the year when I know them better.*

This increased clarity of purpose was claimed to result in changes in record keeping.

> *I keep less marks but more informative anecdotal comments. I write more about the learning process than the products, and note any difficulties children encounter. This helps me but children and parents still prefer marks because they understand them better.*

Quite a few teachers and parents went so far as to say that there were less behaviour problems in the class and at home because the children were more interested in what they were learning, found they were able to handle the material, and they:

> *trust the teachers more because they are seen to be genuinely helpful. "The able children can go fast and the weak can move slowly. We don't hear children say, "I can't do nothing. I hate Maths."*

Another outcome was the development of a common vocabulary across teachers, between the students within a class, and across the school. This was said to:

> *save time in explanation and give children a sense that teachers have a craft and know what they are doing.*

A few teacher made it clear that they did not consider it to be possible to teach all the class individually. They said that they studied the continua to learn where most children were and then designed the mainstream lesson material at that level with alternative activities for the few children who were ready for easier or harder material. They argued that there needed to be more adults in the classroom (such as the aide assistance in a pre-primary) to offer more individualised teaching. Others claimed that the planning might not be individualised but that it was designed such that the students could tackle the prepared activities at their own level.

In several of the case study schools the teachers considered that another common outcome was increased teacher stress as they tried to come to grips with placing students and learning all of the strategies for their levels. One teacher said:

> *We were told Time is not an issue but it is. Even the Focus Teachers were stressed out. Even now we are into it there is too much record keeping.*

Schools with Aboriginal students claimed that the First Steps strategies were equally suitable for these students. In the school with the Special Language and ESL Centers teachers noted that the focus on the language of Mathematics had been particularly beneficial to the students.

Table 7 Outcomes that have resulted from First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Outcomes
A	metro	fully	Improved interest in and attitude to learning, more confidence, better behaviour.
B	outer metro	partially	Improved interest in and attitude to learning, more confidence, better behaviour.
C	metro	school resources	Know what students can do now. Children are more confident. Teachers discuss strategies. Students learn how to learn.
D	junior primary	fully	Know what students can do now. Children are more confident and happy. Children discuss strategies, Lots of work
E	metro	school resources	Standardised tests show children are improving in Spelling Children experiment more with language.
F	metro	school resources	Improved interest in and attitude to learning, more confidence, better behaviour.
G	metro Special Language Center	fully	The language of Mathematics particularly helpful to ESL children. Changes will take time to show. Students' self-esteem improved.
H	country primary	fully	Improved structure giving students increased confidence and better output - especially in writing. Works equally well for ESL and Aboriginal students.
I	district high ELAN	fully	Improved understanding of structures for Writing and consequent improvement in Writing skills. Improved group skills. Aboriginal students improved markedly.
J	large country primary	fully	Improved outcomes in Oral Language. Gives children a fresh chance. Old methods compound failure. Children more confident. Children who would not write are now having a go.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully	Improved student performance. Improved student attitudes. Children more willing to have a go. Children working at own pace. Clear records showing where children are.
L	country primary	fully	Improved student performance. Improved student attitudes. Excellent for children at risk and gifted children.

5.8 Data regarding changing outcomes

Most of the case study schools were not very interested in the question of whether there was any formal data to support their judgements that children were making better progress because of their use of First Steps procedures. Teachers typically made comments like:

> *You only have to look at them working and see their work to see the difference.*
> *Just look at the variety in their Writing.*
> *I suppose you could look at work samples over several years.*
> *Most of us have seen children produce things we did not think they could.*
> *I've been teaching Years 4/5 for six years so I'd know.*

The children's progress along the continua was seen by most of the teachers interviewed as showing that children were making sound progress. Some of the schools had enough information on computer to be able to demonstrate the extent to which children had progressed along the continua in several aspects of language.

This position was sometimes accompanied by the statement that as a school they had decided that they were not interested in measuring student achievement with normed tests as these were seen to have little relevance to the individualised curriculum that they were trying to achieve. One such group of teachers stated:

> *We have faith in First Steps. We see the students progress. We can report to parents on that basis. Why would we seek any further data.*

Teachers in this school were trying to redesign their report form to be suitable for reporting using data from the First Steps continua.

Others were more cautious and held that:

> *We won't really know until children who start on it (First Steps) in Year 1 reach Year 7 or the TEE. (Teacher)*
>
> *We haven't used Pro-Star. What could it tell you if teachers can not agree on interpretation of the Indicators. Its supposed to be a standard measurement, but I don't think it is. (Focus Teacher)*

A further group held that:

> *We start further back each year. The work samples show the children are not improving.*
> *First Steps works best with able students. Our children will not discover things for themselves.*

Table 8 Data regarding changing outcomes

School	Location	Funding	Outcomes
A	metropolitan	fully funded	Progress along the continuum, Teachers' professional judgement.
B	outer metropolitan	partially funded	Progress along the continuum
C	metropolitan	school resources	Progress along the continuum, Teachers' professional judgement, Work samples
D	junior primary	fully funded	Progress along the continuum, Teachers' professional judgement, Work samples
E	metropolitan	school resources	Standardised tests show children are improving in Spelling
F	metropolitan	school resources	Maintain continua but need more data. Test data reassuring to parents and teachers. Confident not losing ground.
G	metropolitan Special Language Center	fully funded	Progress along the continua, work samples, and anecdotal records. I'm an old teacher, I can tell. I have more skills. I know I'm doing it better.
H	country primary	fully funded	Progress along the continua, work samples, and anecdotal records. OSMIS data places us above the State average - attributable to First Steps.
I	distant district high ELAN	fully funded	High school says Writing has improved. Attitudinal changes in students, staff and parents. Progress along the continua, work samples, and anecdotal records.
J	large country primary	fully funded	Progress along the continuum, Teachers' professional judgement, Work samples
K	remote community school ELAN	fully funded	Progress along the continua, work samples, and anecdotal records. Observation. Testing is still important but many centrally made tests are not suitable for our Aboriginal children.
L	country primary	fully funded	Progress along the continuum, Teachers' professional judgement, Work samples, MIS data

5.9 What parents have been told about First Steps

All of the case study schools had attempted to inform parents that the school was implementing the First Steps program. One school said their first evening was so over subscribed that they had to hold two separate groups. Even so they estimated that with all of their efforts they had reached only 40 to 50 per cent of the parents, and that while some had quickly *got the picture*, understood the continuum and started trying to work out where their child fitted, others had very limited understandings as to why the school was telling them about it.

This estimate was supported by the interviews with parents. Notwithstanding in some cases:

- several parent meetings,
- the distribution of **Parent Packs**,
- building information about First Steps into the initial meeting between parents and the classroom teacher at the beginning of the year,
- telling new parents about First Steps,
- sending work samples home regularly, and
- mentioning what the school was doing with regard to First Steps in the newsletter,

some of the parents interviewed nevertheless had little idea of what the First Steps program was, or how it might affect the education of their children.

Frequent teacher comments included:

> *Its hard to explain to some ethnic parents. You can't bring in a translator for three parents.*
> *Most parents here support and trust the school. They sense the teachers are fair dinkum about First Steps and they trust us.*
> *The school is good if their child is happy.*

Parent in quite a few schools made comments which illustrated the schools' difficulty in holding parent meetings a time which suited parents.

> *Its hard to get to evening meetings with young children.*
> *Its hard to get to day meetings if you work.*
> *I was busy that night (or day).*
> *My husband went.*
> *If you don't go to the Parent's night you know nothing.*
> *The invitation should tell parents more about why they should attend.*
> *New parents know nothing about First Steps.*
> *I help in the classroom so I see what's happening, but I don't know which parts are First Steps .*

When considering this situation it is important to remember that the parents were invited to the interview by the principal, and that therefore it was likely that the more interested and involved parents received invitations or were willing and able to attend. Therefore it seems to be reasonable to assume that less involved or interested parents would have little or no understanding of the implications of the school moving towards a First Steps approach.

During the interviews it was clear that the parent's own background played a major role in what they learned from the school's communications. The basic message understood by parents was that First Steps was a new method of teaching in which:

- *children were allowed and encouraged to progress at their own rate,*
- *parents should encourage their children with praise and not criticise their mistakes.*

More involved parents had read the Parent Pack or newsletter articles and understood there were things they could do to assist their child at home, and that, particularly in the lower year levels, parents were welcome to assist also in the classroom. Such parents typically liked the notion of **parents as partners.** One said:

> *We have had our child at home for five years,. We don't want to see him disappear into school. We have laid the foundation and want to see him develop.*

Typical comments from more interested and informed parents included:

- *First Steps facilitates transition across year levels. No staying down.*
- *Children can go at their own rates and the slow are not embarrassed while the bright are encouraged.*
- *Children will learn when they are ready.*
- *More interesting teaching.*
- *All subjects are related.*
- *Parents are encouraged not to use "put downs" at home.*
- *Expectations are not regimented to the age or grade.*
- *Parents have increased confidence in the school because they can understand the continuum and see what the teacher is trying to achieve.*
- *There is a more consistent approach across the school by teachers.*
- *The Have a go approach is great.*
- *I like the policy of consistent praise.*
- *Teachers are not all supportive about First Steps.*
- ***Teachers still screw up children's work and throw it in the bin.***
- *School is not such a black box*
- *There are more varied reading resources*

A few parents who had training for teaching, or some similar experience understood the basic educational philosophy of First Steps in some detail, but such parents were a very small minority and were not to be expected at all in most of the case study schools.

The range of comments from interviews included:

- *We know its developmental and that that is good for our child, but we are not sure what that really means,*
- *I don't know what First Steps is and what it is not, but the teachers here at a good bunch and if they say it is good, we trust them. It's their job to know.*
- *The evening meetings are hard to get to,*
- *Day time meetings are impossible to get to if you work,*
- *My husband would have gone Huh!*
- *We saw our child's slow label gradually disappear.*

Several parents expressed the view that it would have been better to send the Parent Pack home to parents who had not been able to attend the parent evenings. They saw it as having been a lure to make parents attend, and some who could not attend expressed resentment at not being able to get the pack. Their point was strengthened by the experience of one school in which, despite extensive advertising, typically only 4 or 5 parents out of around 150 families attended parent evenings. This school had just about given up seeking parent help in classrooms as teachers considered that the help was too unreliable.

A few parents who were particularly pleased about First Steps claimed that it had especially suited their child:

- *... is not very bright. He is struggling even now, but he would have dropped his bundle in a traditional class. His self-esteem has blossomed. He is happy working at his own pace. The other kids don't take any notice. They are all doing their own thing.*

- *I had always felt that ... had been held back by the rest of the class. Now she can rattle along as she likes. And she is!*

- *Our child was shy. There were tears most mornings. Children teased her, saying she couldn't do anything. She became withdrawn and would not talk. But she is now allowed to work at her own pace and children can't tell her work is different. She is a different girl. Now she can't be shut up. She stands up to other children and won't be put down.*

One principal observed that there were different faces at the parent meetings for Reading, Writing, Spelling and Mathematics and that while this meant that increasing numbers of parents had some knowledge of First Steps, it also meant that many of the parents had heard about only one or a few of the aspects of First Steps.

A distant country school had prepared a video on First Steps and used this as part of the means of informing parents and the community. At interview the parents all mentioned the video. Another quite large country school reported that all of the families in the school attended the parent activity session.

Table 9 What parents have been told about First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Communication with Parents
A	metropolitan	fully funded	Parent meetings, parent training workshop
B	outer metropolitan	partially funded	Parent meetings, roster, parent training workshop
C	metropolitan	school resources	Day and evening parent meetings, parent/teacher interviews children progress at own rate. Praise, no criticism
D	junior primary	fully funded	Parent meetings, roster, parent training workshop
E	metropolitan	school resources	Day and evening parent meetings, parent/teacher interviews children progress at own rate. Praise, no criticism
F	metropolitan	school resources	Day and evening parent meetings, children progress at own rate. Lots help in classrooms
G	metropolitan	fully funded	Parent meetings with interpreters, mostly the English speaking parents came.
H	country primary	fully funded	Parent meetings, Parent Pack, Parent networks. Teacher meetings. Work samples go home. Not a lot of interest.
I	distant district high ELAN	fully funded	Parent meetings, parent Packs, teacher meetings, Open Classrooms twice a year, training workshop for Year 1 parents. Video on First Steps. Aboriginal parent and Elan workshops well attended.
J	large country primary	fully funded	Parent meetings, parent Packs, teacher meetings. Linked to reports.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully funded	Parents have been told that we are using First Steps but are not sure what it is all about. Parents leave the job to the teachers. Given out Parent Packs but most parents can not read it.
L	country primary	fully funded	All families and all staff attended parent meeting!

As a summary of the knowledge parents in the case study schools had of First Steps it would be fair to say that all of those spoken with were either very supportive or were prepared to back the school's judgement about such matters. However in some schools it was clear that notwithstanding many attempts to communicate the essence of First Steps to parents, less than half of the parents could be regarded as knowing anything significant about it.

Before this is seen as a disappointing outcome of all the efforts to inform parents, the level of parent awareness of First Steps should be weighed against parents' complete lack of any knowledge about how other subjects such as Social Studies or Science are being taught.

5.10 Roles parents play with regard to First Steps

Most of the case study schools had invited parents to assist with the implementation of First Steps strategies both at home and in the classroom. As is often the case, arrangements for parents assisting in the classroom worked most effectively in the lower year levels where more parents were at home because of having other children, or where parent interest in their child's schooling was at a peak.

In the lower grades, most of the schools had a parent roster which involved two or three parents assisting in each junior school classroom for some period of the day. Other schools had an open door, *drop-in* arrangement whereby parents came into the classroom if they felt like it.

The common practice was for teachers to teach the material to a small group, and then for them to have prepared practise activities for the children to work through over the next few days while the parents supervise and ensure that the appropriate materials are available. In some of the schools parents typed students' stories into the computers or assisted the children to type in their stories.

Several teachers expressed the view that the parent help was very valuable but that there were never enough parents to fill the roster (*Its impossible to fill the 11.30 slot*!). The same small group of parents usually provided the support. Several teachers commented to the effect that it is really only the parents who help in the classroom who understand what the First Steps changes really have achieved for their children.

Quite a few upper grade parents said their children did not want their parents in class as it was embarrassing but they had found it reassuring to see the teacher so interested in the new teaching methods.

Some of the parents who had a position that **My time is my child's** expressed their concern that they felt increasingly lacking in confidence as their child moved up through the year levels. This might help explain why the availability of parent assistance in classrooms dropped off rapidly after Year Three in the case study schools.

Parents commonly stated that at home they:

- *hear reading,*
- *help with story writing by correcting spelling (!) and suggesting ideas.*

At one school teachers had observed that while parents approved of and publicly supported the policy of praise and encouragement to *have a go*, both when helping in the classroom and with work at home, many were incorrigible with regard to demanding correct spelling, punctuation and neat setting out. There were comments from parents at interview to the effect that:

I can't praise poor work.

These teachers considered that it would take working one-on-one with families to get strong support at home from parents for the *have a go* approach.

Some parents are quite daunted by the thought of helping in class.
Choosing the right parents is hard.

Table 10 Roles parents play with regard to First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Parent roles
A	metropolitan	fully funded	help at home, mainly with hearing reading.
B	outer metropolitan	partially funded	help in class, help at home, mainly lower grades
C	metropolitan	school resources	help in class, help at home, mainly lower grades
D	junior primary	fully funded	help at home, mainly with hearing reading. very hard to involve parents here
E	metropolitan	school resources	help at home, encourage mainly with hearing reading, help in Year 1 and 2 rooms.
F	metropolitan	school resources	help at home, Lots of families assist in classrooms. Lots of parents as partners sheets go home.
G	metropolitan Special Language Center	fully funded	Difficult for non-English speaking parents to understand and help.
H	country primary	fully funded	Junior School parents heavily involved. Not a lot of assistance in upper grades. Parents feel threatened.
I	distant district high ELAN	fully funded	Promoting First Steps to the community. Helping in the classroom. Attending staff professional development. Assist Aboriginal children with Concept Key Board.
J	large country primary	fully funded	Limited parent involvement. Parents who assist in the classroom were very positive.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully funded	Very limited involvement. Teachers see parents individually.
L	country primary	fully funded	Parents work on First Steps activities with groups of children

5.11 What parents think about First Steps

Typical comments from parents included:

- *Most parents who know about First Steps like it.*
- *Most parents don't understand First Steps.*
- *Most parent trust the teachers here and think that if they are supporting it it must be good.*
- *Its about a continuum or something.*
- *Many parents at this school have such limited English that we can not describe First Steps adequately to them.*
- *We need re-educating to see that where ever the child is is OK and that we should not compare children.*
- *First Steps will help the transition across year levels.*
- *Its good because you don't have to explain the same things to teachers each year.*
- *Before First Steps there was a timetable children followed. Now they can proceed at their own rate.*
- *When ...was pulled out for remedial work she did not want to go to school, now with First Steps the children can not tell what work she is doing.*
- *It sounds good in theory, but what about occasional snippets in the newsletter to tell us how it is going. We find out by asking our child.*
- *It was supposed to be more interesting for students, but we have not heard that school is more fun. They do talk a lot about what they are doing at school.*

A few parents were concerned that over zealous parents could *work the system to make their child seem advanced.* They feared that an absence of *real tests* would make it difficult to tell if their child was progressing satisfactorily, and make it possible for parents to coach their child on the continuum skills. A common comment was:

> *There isn't a standard.*
> *The teacher says he's going fine, but he should know to stop at a full stop (when reading) by Year 5.*

Some of the keener and more informed parents believed that the First Steps had done well in telling parents what it was at the beginning of the involvement, and during beginning of the year parent interviews, but they had heard nothing since from teachers and felt ill equipped to assist their children.

Another group of parents wanted to voice disapproval at the emphasis given to sport, art, concerts etc rather than reading, writing and arithmetic. They did not see First Steps as having helped in this regard.

In a similar manner a few parents wanted to complain about their child's present teacher:

> *The new program is one thing. The teacher is another. ...has just gone backwards since she got with Mrs ... She intimidates her so she won't try.*
> *Are all teachers really using First Steps? I don't think ours is.*

Table 11 · What parents think about First Steps

School	Location	Funding	Opinions
A	metropolitan	fully funded	Its really the school's business. If my child is happy and going well, I'm happy.
B	outer metropolitan	partially funded	*Its great for my child*, through to *Its the school's business*
C	metropolitan	school resources	Like the progress at the child's pace, and the absence of stigma for children working on easier material. Some concern over whether there were standards
D	junior primary	fully funded	Parents regard it as the school's business. If my child is happy and going well, I'm happy.
E	metropolitan	school resources	Parents regard it as the school's business. If my child is happy and going well, I'm happy.
F	metropolitan	school resources	If our teachers are supporting it it must be good. Children progress at own rate. Our child is happy and likes reading.
G	metropolitan Special Language Center	fully funded	Most do not know about First Steps or understand it.
H	country primary	fully funded	Many parents are confused about First Steps. Some don't care. Some are very interested and very happy.
I	distant district high ELAN	fully funded	Its working really well. Less pressure on children. Positive self-esteem. Parents are our public relations with the community about First Steps.
J	large country primary	fully funded	Parents happy if children are happy. Involved parents very supportive.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully funded	No feedback is good! Parents happy if children are happy.
L	country primary	fully funded	Most parents do not say a lot, but we believe they are very positive. They leave it to us. They were very supportive of the School Development Plan which mentions First Steps a lot.

5.12 Best aspects of being a First Steps school

The following categories of answer were commonly received to this question.

Professional development
The fact that the whole school went to the same professional development for the same extended period, and that it was good quality professional development with useful support documents, was for many teachers the best aspect of being a First Steps school.

> *Lots of professional development and resources which did not cost us anything.*

Improved Student attitude to school and learning.
Teachers in most of the case study schools stated that improved student attitudes was a major gain from starting with First Steps.

> *It has taken away failure.*
> *There is no more* ***This kid can't spell!*** *Now its* ***This kid can do XXX!***

Team Building
Another common *Best Aspect* was that by working on First Steps as a whole staff had brought the staff together and helped to meld them more into a team. Teachers said they had more professional discussions at morning teas and lunch breaks, and were getting to be accustomed to planning their teaching in a shared way.

> *Everyone is on the same wave length about language.*

Interest in teaching
For many of the teachers interviewed First Steps had revitalised their interest and enthusiasm for teaching. They made comments such as:

> *I get more enjoyment now as I can offer the children more. I know more strategies and get excitement from their interest in what we are doing.*

Focus Teachers
The most common comments about the best aspects of being a First Steps school related to the way it was resourced and the support teachers received while learning to implement the recommended procedures. There was:

> *Someone to ask.*
> *Someone to tell us what is happening across the school.*
> *Having ...(the Focus Teacher) here! She was so knowledgeable and so encouraging and always available.*

While the materials and professional development received strong support, the most commonly mentioned best aspect in most case study schools was the value of the support provided by the Focus Teachers or Collaborative Teachers. It was noteworthy that the strength of this comment varied markedly between schools and seemed related to the esteem in which the support teacher was held, along with the amount of time that the support teacher could devote to the role.

> *At another school I asked for help and was offered one hour because that was all the Focus Teacher had per week. That was a joke! Teachers fell apart with the pressure. Here we can get some real help if we need and want it.*

While it seemed self-evident that support teachers appointed only 0.2 time have much less opportunity to have an impact than full time support teachers, it seemed from talking with teachers in the case study schools that this difference in available support time, and the choice of the Focus Teacher might be the key factor in the school's progress with implementation. In a few cases teachers spoke extremely positively about the way the style of assistance provided by the present, or a previous Focus Teacher facilitated rapid and happy progress. Teachers commented about how the differing styles of the Focus Teachers influenced what they themselves ended up trying.

The roles of the Focus Teachers with regard to demonstrating strategies, taking the class while the teacher entered data into the computer, providing fresh information, and providing a supporting ear, received frequent positive comments. In some schools the Focus Teachers were said to **keep it moving**.

It was noted that different teachers used the Focus Teachers in different ways, and that some teachers did not seek assistance. Similarly, some Focus Teachers believed they should give priority to (say) demonstration lessons, while others gave priority to providing in-class support or entering data into the computer program.

Clarity in teaching

Another common *best aspect* of working with First Steps was stated as being the clarity that working from the continua brought to teaching. Teachers stated that whereas previously they had planned their teaching on the basis of curriculum documents, student interest, available resources, and how they had previously addressed that aspect of the curriculum, under First Steps they had maps showing what each child could do, and had lists of strategies and resources appropriate to the activities suited to helping children to move forward from where they were.

The staffroom wall in one school showed samples of pages to illustrate the link from the child's work to the continuum, to the selection of strategies, to the teacher's daily work pad and back to the student's work. One teacher described it as almost like *painting by numbers.*

Variety in teaching

Another common comment was the value of the range of teaching strategies linked to aspects of the continua. Learning new strategies was seen as a valued aspect of First Steps, however many of the teachers were keen to emphasise that they had known about lots of the strategies and had used many of them in their teaching for years. Even then they usually agreed that it was often useful to be reminded of strategies which they had not used for a while.

The **Have a go** slogan apparently was applied to new teaching activities as many teachers made comments like:

It gave me courage to experiment.

Teachers commonly remarked that the students quickly came to recognise certain strategies, and to really enjoy some in particular. They would sometimes say **I hope we are going to have ?? today.**

The kids enjoy it more, so I do.

A few teachers asked:

Are we a First Steps school? What does it mean to be a First Steps school? We use some First Steps ideas. Does that make us a First Steps school?

Table 12 Best aspects of being a First Steps school

School	Location	Funding	Best aspects
A	metropolitan	fully funded	Improved student attitudes, increased teacher enjoyment, more team spirit among staff
B	outer metropolitan	partially funded	Collaborative teacher, increased range of strategies, clear teaching focus
C	metropolitan	school resources	More sharing, The professional development, The Focus Teacher support
D	junior primary	fully funded	Taken away failure. Continuum pinpoints students' needs. The range of strategies
E	metropolitan	school resources	More professional sharing. Coherent curriculum across the years, more experiment in teaching.
F	metropolitan	school resources	Professional development and resources, Everyone on same wave length
G	metropolitan Special Language Center	fully funded	The resources and priority given to language. Collegial support. The collaborative teacher. Increased job satisfaction. Common purpose.
H	country primary	fully funded	The resource materials, the support. Teaching whole language! You start in the morning and go on without chopping it up.
I	distant district high ELAN	fully funded	Continuity of policy, vocabulary, strategies, and standards across the school. Students prepared to take risks in language. Parents say it brought them and the school more together as a co-operation.
J	large country primary	fully funded	Central Office and District Office support. Common vision and language. Collaborative effort. Feel successful as a teacher.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully funded	Excellent strategies and resources. Improved attitudes and outcomes. Continuity of programmes. Children feel successful.
L	country primary	fully funded	Learning very student centred. Staff very cohesive. Teaching strategies for problem solving. Greater insight into children because of the continua

5.13 Difficulties experienced

The most common difficulties mentioned by staff in the case study schools were the extra time required (particularly in the initial stages) and frustrations arising from coming to understand and agree as a staff about the meaning of aspects of the continua and the Indicators.

These frustrations were exacerbated by changes that were made to the continua by the project team. When teachers were trying to see the continua as the bedrock of their new approach to language some were confused and annoyed by the changes even though the understood why the changes were being made. The later commercial publishing of First Steps materials led to further changes to the continua and to the existence of parallel forms of the continua. This has disconcerted some teachers, perhaps because they see the continuum as a truth rather than a conceptual model.

Problems encountered with implementing First Steps included:

- *training temporary teachers who were then lost to the school,*
- *incoming teachers who had not been trained,*
- *starting too much too quickly (We started three continua at once and had to learn three recording systems!),*
- *placements varying within and across schools.*
- *Teachers hitting a problem and giving up.*
- *Students reaching Years 5-6 still spelling poorly.*

In most of the case study schools teachers in the Junior grades made faster and more complete progress with the implementation of First Steps. In the words of one of the principals:

> *Lower school teachers were quicker to see the relevance of the ideas. Upper school teachers have been less keen to let go.*

However some upper school teachers expressed the view that if this situation was the case, it arose because First Steps had its origins in and was more directed towards the Junior grades such that the professional development and classroom support was more relevant for those teachers.

Children with Special Needs

One group of teachers felt strongly that, notwithstanding what they considered they had been advised, First Steps did not enable them to provide adequately in the classroom for children who had very different learning needs from the other children. They considered that First Steps enabled children at varying stages of the continuum to have appropriate activities arranged for them within the classroom groups, but they argued the continuing need for the withdrawal of some children for more focussed attention, and were prepared to back the positive effects of the gains that would accrue against the effects of any stigma that might result from being withdrawn.

The Oral Language continuum and ELAN students
One school raised a concern that the Oral Language continuum was too difficult such that many of their students could not be placed at all. The staff were working on a modification of that continuum.

Reporting and the continua
In some of the case study schools the lack of a clear link between reporting to parents and the information on the continua was a source of frustration to teachers. They sought clarity regarding the purposes of the continua.

It was generally seen that it was useful to place children on the continuum so as to be more aware of their level of development and therefore what to teach them next. Once this was done, some teachers (usually in the upper primary grades) were content to put the box of continua data into the cupboard until the next time for placement. Others used the continua data as the basis for lesson planning. However few of the case study schools had completed a link to reporting using the continua. In one school where they had just completed redesigning the report form to be suitable for reporting to parents using First Steps data the teachers were not sure about how it would work or how parents would receive it.

Other case study schools were covering this concern by collecting traditional forms of student assessment data alongside the continua data, but the teachers were aware that this entailed an additional workload.

The change from traditional measures of progress such as tests, coupled with changed expectations regarding rates of progress caused some teachers to feel they had lost their ways of telling how they were going.

I feel I'm not covering enough.

Training and Part Time Teachers
The training of graduating and part time teachers in First Steps was listed as a problem. Several schools had offered part time teachers the opportunity to be trained in their own time, but this was still seen as an issue.

Catching up with other areas
In several schools the efforts of taking on First Steps had been all consuming to the point where:

everything else is secondary. Maths, Phys Ed, Science all go on the back burner.

-

The professional development was great, but it cut out all other professional development for other areas.

5.13 The future of First Steps in the school

All of the case study schools considered that First Steps could only move forwards in the school.

Its part of our School Development Plan, so its here to stay.
It won't die here.

Some still had other modules to adopt and were planning for the necessary professional development.

We need now to do Oral Language.
I wish we knew what was happening in Maths.
Still a lot to do.
Reading in a bigger way.

However the problem of assisting new staff to catch up with the school's particular First Steps program was raised by several principals.

Case study schools with special focus areas such as ELAN said they intended to continue and expand these as they were becoming increasingly aware of the children's needs and the power of these approaches to assist them.

A particularly powerful comment about the future of First Steps was:

It won't be First Steps. It will be normal language teaching.

Table 13 The future of First Steps in the school

School	Location	Funding	Future
A	metropolitan	fully funded	Consolidate, refine, Reading and Writing. Develop ELAN with Aboriginal children. Finish Maths and Oral Language
B	outer metropolitan	partially funded	Keep going, More Maths, Report from continuum
C	metropolitan	school resources	Still a lot to do. Find out about Maths. Reading in a bigger way.
D	junior primary	fully funded	It won't die here. Its part of what we do now.
E	metropolitan	school resources	Keep going, Do Oral Language and Mathematics, but will the support be there?
F	metropolitan	school resources	Consolidate and finish policy development. Analyse and adapt to our school. Review and finish all modules.
G	metropolitan Special Language Center	fully funded	It will keep happening. We will focus on one area at a time. We are committed as a school. Part of the School Development Plan.
H	country primary	fully funded	There will be a need to refresh, to keep building on what we know. Strong stable staff to keep it going.
I	distant district high	fully funded	Very positive future. First Steps will continue to drive the Literacy program. It will become more refined. Train new staff. Work on report format. Promote in community.
J	large country primary	fully funded	Need to polish. Build in student Outcome Statements. Put Reading on Hold. Question the Indicators. Teachers need time.
K	remote community school ELAN	fully funded	Whole staff transferring. It will depend upon the new staff. At a nearby school (sic!) successful First Steps implementation was lost when most of the staff changed.
L	country primary	fully funded	First Steps will continue. Language our priority in 1995. Consolidate Reading and Writing. No time yet for Spelling and Oral Language.

5.14 Further steps needed

Finish the Modules
For many the first requirement was to finish learning the First Steps sections.

Maths is just as important as language and we haven't done it yet!

Time to Reflect
In a few schools teachers were in favour of an opportunity to have time together to reflect upon where they have reached and explore their areas of success and concern, and time to see what other teachers in the school were doing.

In schools where they have been working with First Steps for several years they felt it was time to pause and regroup for the next step. Although in some case study schools some time was given to First Steps at each staff meeting, this was not thought to be of sufficient duration for the reflection upon progress.

While supporting the idea of time for staff to come together to discuss where they have reached, a further proposal was for district wide meetings of school representatives so that there could be across school sharing of experiences and learning with regard to the implementation of First Steps.

Encouraging the tardy
In nearly all of the case study schools some teachers had proceeded further with implementing First Steps ideas than others. This was seen as natural and desirable. However in the schools that had taken it as a staff decision that teachers would implement all aspects covered so far concern was expressed regarding teachers who were making slow or minimal progress. A tension between respect for professional independence and the whole staff decision was evident.

This position was made more difficult by lack of clarity as to what it meant to have agreed to *take on First Steps*. Teachers were not clear as to whether it meant to place children on the continuum, to plan teaching from the continuum placements, to use First Steps teaching strategies, or to place, plan, teach and report on the basis of the continuum.

Clarify the valid use of student data
Some teachers urged that the Education Department clarify the valid purposes to which the First Steps student data could be applied. They were concerned that information about students' progress along the continua should not ever be used as a measure of teacher performance by the school's management.

Part of the reason for raising this concern was their belief that it was important for teachers to accept that it was perfectly acceptable for children to make slow progress, if that matched their capabilities. They were aware that this was not accepted by all of their colleagues, nor by many parents, and they believed that if the student information was used for other purposes than guiding their teaching, then teachers would not be encouraged to allow such varied rates of progress.

They can be in a Level for three years. Try explaining that to parents.

Putting data into Pro-Star may help the MIS but it takes a lot of time and is no help to me in my teaching.

Reporting to Parents

Some teachers took the position that the student information should not be used for reporting to parents, at least until all parents had been fully informed about interpreting its meaning and had accepted that the arguments for individual rates of progress applied to their children also. Others called for clarification of the ways that First Steps data could be used for reporting to parents - especially as students can appear to parents not to be making progress.

The special situation of reporting in First Steps terms regarding students in ESL situations was raised. It was suggested that a new continuum was needed for this.

Refining the Indicators

In several of the case study schools there was still a concern that staff had differing understandings about some of the Indicators. Refining the clarity of some Indicators was seen as desirable by some teachers, but other saw this as precipitating changes to the data they had collected, and to require more learning just when they thought they were getting a comfortable understanding of the continua. Concern was also expressed regarding the multiple versions of the continua now in existence.

We still have to put the data into Pro-Star, but we want to refine the continua to suit us some more.

Student Outcomes

Teachers and principals in several schools raised a question of the potential impact on the First Steps project of the development of student Outcome Statements. One principal had heard a rumour that neighbouring schools had begun closing down their First Steps focus to address student outcomes. He hoped that the Education Department would develop a constructive link between First Steps and Outcome Statements, but had decided to suspend thinking about Outcome Statements until the link to First Steps had been thought through.

Policy Development

Several schools stated that they needed to (or had) included further developments in First Steps as part of their School Development Plan. They considered that this would assist in ensuring that they would continue to move forward.

Other suggestions

Parents and teachers who were very keen about First Steps would like to see:

- First Steps in Science and Social Studies
- First Steps linked secondary school to assist with the transition.
- Ways of communicating with and training parents that reached out more effectively to all parents and did not make those who could not attend feel let down.
- Ways of reaching parents who think that the school is the teachers' job.
- A trial of having parents run First Steps training sessions for parents.
- First Steps all over the curriculum.

6.0 CONCLUSION

It was surprising how many interviews finished with an emotional statement such as:

Great program! I love it.

In noting the findings of the study it should be remembered that the information gathered in these 12 case study schools, selected as having made successful progress with implementing First Steps, included every possible shade of opinion:

It really helps the able kids to go at their own pace, but it does not suit the at risk children. They need teaching.
The continuum is relevant to the lower grades and children at risk. Not the able.
First Steps will be replaced by Student Outcomes.
First Steps fits in well with Student Outcomes.
We are not a First Steps school! We are a school that uses some of the First Steps ideas.

First Steps was commonly stated as having a lot to offer ESL and ELAN children, Aboriginal children, as well as children regarded as *at risk* for whatever reason. Yet again the completely opposite views were expressed.

Its no good for Aboriginal children.
It works particularly well with Aboriginal students.

The data from the companion project, the survey of 150 schools, provides a broader base from which to consider these perspectives and is able to show the balance of support between the perspectives. This present study can note however the rich enthusiasm for the First Steps program shown by teachers in ELAN and ESL schools and the conviction they had that it had assisted their task in major ways.

Case Study reports are intended to describe rather than draw conclusions. It is not possible to check the facts behind the opinions given. However it should be noted that the case study schools willingly provided copies of school documents showing the implementation of First Steps thinking into their School Development Plans, parent notices and teachers' planning. Many of these were obviously the product of hours of collaborative staff effort.

If one were to select the teacher comments which best captured the prevailing (but by no means unanimous) attitude towards the experience of working with First Steps, they would be:

- *It has reminded us that teaching does not equal learning, and that we must move at a pace the child can handle.*
- *If you follow First Steps procedures there is success and children feel it and confidence grows. Nothing succeeds like success.*
- *It was the first quality professional development I've ever had.*

Appendix 1

Letter of confirmation and interview questions

Precision Information Pty Ltd
100 Castlecrag Drive
Kallaroo, WA, 6025
Telephone 307 6391
Facsimile 307 3466
ACN 009 259 205

Mr .....
Principal
.....Pimary School

Dear .....

This is to confirm the invitation for your school to be included in the study of First Steps - Best Practice. In order to start the process I would like to arrange to visit your school in November.

I would like the opportunity for to speak with:

- Those of the admin team most involved with the implementation of First Steps in your school,
- The Focus A Teacher,
- Three of four classroom teachers who are using First Steps,
- Three or four parents who are typical of your school community.

The discussions could be with the people individually or as a group depending upon which suits your circumstances. Each discussion should take no more than an hour.

The general questions about which we would like information are attached, however we hope for a discussion rather than a formal interview.

As agreed, the project can offer some teacher relief if this is needed.

I look forward to meeting with you.

Yours faithfully,

Philip Deschamp (Dr)
14 September, 1994

GOOD PRACTICE:
CASE STUDIES OF FIRST STEPS IN ACTION

Case Study Questions

Questions for the Admin Team

1. When did this school begin with First Steps?
2. Prior to starting First Steps what was the structure of the Literacy programme?
3. What Professional Development in First Steps has the school participated in?
4. What do staff think about First Steps?
5. To what extent have First Steps strategies been implemented?
6. What has changed as a result of First Steps?
7. What outcomes have resulted from First Steps?
8. What data do you have to show how outcomes are changing?
9. What have parents been told about First Steps?
10. What roles do parents play with regard to First Steps?
11. What do parents think about First Steps?
12. What have been the best aspects of being a First Steps school?
13. What is the future of First Steps in the school?
14. What still needs to be done in the school?
15. What do you still intend to do?

Questions for Key/Focus Teachers

1. Prior to starting First Steps what was the structure of your Literacy programme?
2. What Professional Development in First Steps have you participated in?
3. What do you think about First Steps?
4. What roles have you played in the implementation of First Steps?
5. To what extent have First Steps strategies been implemented in the school?
6. What has changed as a result of First Steps?
7. What outcomes have resulted from First Steps?
8. What data do you have to show how outcomes are changing?
9. What have parents been told about First Steps?
10. What roles do parents play with regard to First Steps?
11. What do parents think about First Steps?
12. What have been the best aspects of being a First Steps school?
13. What is the future of First Steps in the school?
14. What still needs to be done in the school?
15. What do you still intend to do?
16. In what other ways would you like to see First Steps develop?

Questions for teachers

1. Prior to starting First Steps what was the structure of your Literacy programme?
2. What Professional Development in First Steps have you participated in?
3. What do you think about First Steps?
4. What roles have you played in the implementation of First Steps?
5. To what extent have First Steps strategies been implemented in your teaching?
6. What has changed as a result of First Steps?
7. What outcomes have resulted from First Steps?
8. What data do you have to show how outcomes are changing?
9. What have parents been told about First Steps?
10. What roles do parents play with regard to First Steps?
11. What do parents think about First Steps?
12. What have been the best aspects of being a First Steps school?
13. What is the future of First Steps in the school?
14. What still needs to be done in the school?
15. What do you still intend to do?
16. In what other ways would you like to see First Steps develop?

Questions for parent representatives

1. What have parents been told about First Steps?
2. What roles do parents play with regard to First Steps?
3. What do parents think about First Steps?
4. What has changed as a result of First Steps?
5. What outcomes have resulted from First Steps?
6. What have been the best aspects of being a First Steps school?
7. In what other ways would you like to see First Steps develop?